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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of a college business/professional speaking course on the communication skills' development of students. The research examined three hypotheses: (1) that student ratings of their own communication skills would show a significant improvement after a 16-week course on business and professional speaking; (2) that males and females would not show a significant difference in their appraisal of their communication skills following the course; and (3) that undergraduate and graduate students would not show significant differences in their appraisal of their communication skills following the course. The study substantiated the first hypothesis but not the second or third. With regard to the first hypothesis, it was observed that when students viewed a videotape of their performance and then discussed it with a teacher their performance skills improved. With regard to the second hypothesis, male students did not report a significant improvement in their skills, while female students did. There are some indications that males are more developed in terms of their public speaking skills; if these indications are accurate, they could explain why males did not experience the degree of improvement that females did. With regard to the third hypothesis, graduate students did not report the degree of improvement that undergraduates did. These results could be explained by the fact that graduate students have more professional experience and educational background. (TB)

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ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES IN TEACHING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SPEAKING

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A Paper Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 18-21, 1995, San Antonio, Texas

Abstract

Only recently has the task at hand received the attention it deserves. In the 1990s the issue has been raised on a regular basis by students, the faculty, school administrators, governing boards, legislators, and the public at large. This field study examined effects of a college business/professional speaking course on the communication skills development of students. The research focused on three hypotheses: H1: Student ratings of their communication skills development would show a significant improvement following a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, H2: No significant difference would exist between female and male student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, H3: No significant difference would exist between undergraduate and graduate student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking. In relation to hypothesis 1 that student ratings of their communication skills development would show a significant improvement following a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, the data showed at the .01 alpha level there was a statistically significant self-reported improvement. The second hypothesis that no significant difference would exist between female and male student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking was not upheld by the data. As it concerns hypothesis 3 that no significant difference would exist between undergraduate and graduate student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, it was not upheld by the data.

ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES IN TEACHING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SPEAKING

Introduction

Today administrators and faculty are asked to provide fair, accurate, and consistent assessments of instruction. Initial considerations concerning evaluation of teaching effectiveness by faculty include: (a) Why do evaluations? (b) What are the purposes of evaluation? (c) Who should be evaluated? (d) What should be evaluated? and, (e) How should it be evaluated?

Only recently has the task at hand received the attention it deserves. In the 1990s the issue has been raised on a regular basis by students, the faculty, school administrators, governing boards, legislators, and the public at large.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this field research project was to assess the level of communication skills development reported by students enrolled in a college business and professional speaking course.

Justification

Since A Nation at Risk reached the bookshelves, there has been a national mandate for assessment in education in the United States. Angelo and Cross (1993) and others have focused on the question, how effectively are teachers teaching? In this paper we turn our focus to a specific dimension of teaching, that is the assessment of assessment of learning outcomes in a business and professional speaking course. Appropriate assessment is important for two major reasons: (a) to insure student success in college and (b) to support faculty requests concerning promotion, tenure, and merit decisions. However, only recently has the task at hand received the attention it deserves. In the 1990s the issue has been raised on a regular basis by students, the faculty, school administrators, governing boards, legislators, and the public at large.

Review of Literature

In order to achieve the purpose of this field study, it was necessary to examine extant literature concerning (a) Importance of Business and Professional Speaking and (b) Assessment in Higher Education.

Importance of Business and Professional Speaking

Watt (1995) asked, Why is there so much attention given to business and professional speaking? Answer: Survival. As members of a democratic society, people must be able to effectively communicate. Sprague (cited in Carlson & Smith-Howell, 1995 April) posited speech education should be a concern for all communication studies scholars and teachers.

As suggested by VanOosting (1992), individuals cannot reach full potential unless they have reliable communication skills. He concluded the ability to effectively communicate is the most important skills an individual possess.

Assessment in Higher Education

Identification of ways to effectively assess learning is critical in the field of communication studies (Aitken, 1994 November). Rubin, Welch, and Buerkel (1995, January) have noted that "in speech communication, teacher effectiveness has been measured typically by examining the teacher's classroom style and manner...observers or teachers report their own communication behaviors and researchers make judgments about qualities....We suggest her that another method of assessing teacher impact is to determine the level of student development" (p. 30).

Given the importance to students and faculty, assessment of learning must meet a number of important criteria in order to be effective. Experience has suggested the following eight principles apply when seeking to assess the effectiveness of learning in the classroom.

Accuracy. When dealing with assessment, it is important to clearly and directly set forth the standards of measurement. Conformity to the established standards helps to assure an accurate assessment. This is possible because ambiguity has been reduced.

Advocacy. It is important for the faculty to know the importance of teaching and its role in the process of educating students. Faculty's efforts need to be supported and recognized as the most important element of the profession of being a teacher.

Clarity. Faculty need to "understand" what it means to "assess"; to be an "teach". Avoiding confusion and freeing them from ambiguity reduces tension on the part of the faculty member and allows greater performance.

Consistency. Assessment ought to be consistent. Consistency allows for a feeling of stability. Varying expectations of the quality of teaching and the level of student learning among individuals should be avoided. It is imperative to set "expectations" and then to follow through as you assess the performance in the classroom.

Delegation. Allow "sharing" in the decision-making process. Empower teachers to evaluate their work. Creating an environment of "shared responsibility" can lead to a better quality of education. And, certainly faculty should be be encouraged to involve students in making decisions about course options and learning expectations.

Fairness. Although it can be argued that "life isn't fair," that does not make it okay to give preferential treatment among those being evaluated in the classroom. Striving for objectivity during the assessment process is vital. Those assessing learning outcomes must be perceived as willing to protect the rights of both faculty and students, even if it means having to do so by overriding substantive organizational rules and procedures when it is in the best interest of the involved parties.

Information. Information is crucial to effective teaching and learning in the classroom. Faculty and students should be "educated". Faculty must be given the information they need to teach effectively, and students ought to be able to expect that "appropriate" information will be given to them in a timely manner.

Specificity. Teachers and students depend on the information they receive in order to make decisions, therefore it is necessary for both to be told exactly "how to" perform their tasks.

Methodology

This field study examined effects of a college business/professional speaking course on the communication skills development of students. The research focused on three hypotheses:

H1: Student ratings of their communication skills development would show a significant improvement following a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

H2: No significant difference would exist between female and male student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

H3: No significant difference would exist between undergraduate and graduate student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

Participants

The participants were undergraduate and graduate students in a fall semester course at a mid-sized, state university. They consisted of business communications, public relations, journalism, information networking and telecommunications, and general communication majors. There selected because they were enrolled in either COMM 514 or COMM 714 Business and Professional Speaking.

Apparatus

The Skills Assessment instrument was used as a pre- and post-test device for measuring the participants' level of development concerning 37 specific business/professional speaking skills. The instrument used was a 7-point Likert scale questionnaire wherein 1 designated "low development" through 7 for "high development" (see Appendix).

Procedure

The following steps were used:

Step 1. At the first class meeting of the fall semester the purpose of the field study was explained and the process was described to the participants (N=20 undergraduate and graduate students) enrolled in COMM 514 or COMM 714 Business and Professional Speaking. Students were given an opportunity to transfer to another section of the same course.

Step 2. Next students were asked to sign a "Agreement to Participate" form which included a protection of identity and confidentiality of information as well as a statement that only grouped data would be reported in the results. Participants were informed they could leave the study without penalty at anytime during the semester.

Step 3. The pre-Skills Assessment instrument was distributed. Participants were asked to include their name, major, gender, and whether they were an undergraduate or graduate student. Students were given approximately 20 minutes to respond to the 37 items on the questionnaire. Once completed, the instrument was returned to the instructor of the course.

Step 4. The 20 questionnaires were stored for safe-keeping in the department chair's office in the communication department.

Step 5. Over the next 15 weeks the participants received instruction and delivered 4 business/professional presentations. The required textbook was the courseworks edition of Theory and Applications for Effective Business and Professional Presentations (1995, revised edition) developed by Willis M. Watt and published by Brown and Benchmark Publishers.

During the first 4 weeks students participated in lecture and discussion concerning several "traditional" topics dealing with business/professional speaking (e.g., researching, organizing, etc.) and communication concepts (e.g., communication apprehension, presentational delivery hints, etc.). This was followed by 4 laboratory experiences dealing with "instructional," "persuasive internal," "persuasive external," and "reportorial" presentations. Graduate students selected and completed a fifth presentation by choosing among the assignment options.

Each "lab" experience was preceded by detailed explanation of the expectations of student outcomes and the evaluation. A sample video was presented for each type of presentation and using the course presentation

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evaluation form, the students viewed and critiqued the sample. Each student's presentation was videotaped. After each student's presentation in the classroom, the student privately viewed and critiqued her or his own presentation while watching the videotape. Next, the student and the instructor met for a minimum of 30 minutes during which time they viewed the student's presentation and discussed its strengths and weaknesses. Presentational development worksheets and outlines were also examined and reviewed during the teacher-student interview period.

Step 6. During the class period in the final examination week, the participants (N=19 undergraduate and graduate students) completed the post-Skills Assessment instrument. The questionnaires were collected by the instructor of the course.

Step 7. Data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics and the mean scores were analyzed using a two-sample, unmatched pairs t-test using Number Cruncher Statistical System (NCSS) by Hintze (1992).

Results

This field study examined effects of a college business/professional speaking course on the communication skills development of students. The hypotheses were:

H1: Student ratings of their communication skills development would show a significant improvement following a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

H2: No significant difference would exist between female and male student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

H3: No significant difference would exist between undergraduate and graduate student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking.

For the test the following data were collected:

Table 1

Gender and Level

	Males		Females	
	Undergraduate	Graduate	Undergraduate	Graduate
Pre-test (N=20)	4	3	11	2
Post-test (N=19)	3	3	11	2

One participant did not complete the post-Assessment Skills questionnaire.

Table 2

Gender

	Males	Females
	Mean Count	Mean Count
Pre-test (N=20)	181	162
Post-test (N=19)	223	213

T-values: Males -3.0807 Females -4.9093

The data showed a statistically significant change at the .01 level for the female participants. A near significant value was reported for the males.

Table 3

Education Level

	Undergraduate	Graduate
	Mean Count	Mean Count
Pre-test (N=20)	161	190
Post-test (N=19)	213	222

T-values: Undergraduate -5.6948 Graduate -1.9300

The data showed a statistically significant change at the .01 level for the undergraduate participants. A non-significant value was reported for the graduates.

Table 4

Overall Skills Development

	Mean
Pre-test (N=20)	169
Post-test (N=19)	216

T-value: -5.6349

The data showed a statistically significant change at the .01 level for the participants.

Figure 1

Line Plot - Female

```
Score      93                                                    237

Pre-test   1.............11....1...1.1.1.2.....2...1..1.............

Post-test  .................................1.1..1.11.1.1.......2211
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R=93-237

Figure 2

Line Plot - Male

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Score      141                                                   239

Pre-test   1...........1..11.............1.......1.......1.........

Post-test  ..............................1...........1...1.....3...
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R=141-239

Figure 3

Line Plot - Undergraduate

Score	93	235
Pre-test	1.....11....1...1..21111....11..2.....	
Post-test	.....1..1..111..1.1.....223	

R=93-235

Figure 4

Line Plot - Graduate

Score	141	240
Pre-test	1.....1.....1..1.....1.....	
Post-test	.....1.....1..1.....1.1....	

R=141-240

Figure 5

Line Plot - Overall

Score	93	237
Pre-test	1.....11..1.1...1.2.212.....2..11..1.1.....1.....	
Post-test	.....1.1..1111.1.1..1.1..2331.	

R=93-237

Discussion

Having implemented the methodology and analyzed the results, it was necessary to examine a number of conclusions concerning the hypotheses and assessment, explore the limitations of this field research, and offer some

suggestions for further research.

Conclusions

In relation to hypothesis 1 that student ratings of their communication skills development would show a significant improvement following a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, the data showed at the .01 alpha level there was a statistically significant self-reported improvement. This improvement is likely to have occurred as a result of the laboratory experiences (4 for undergraduate; 5 for graduate). Over the years an intuitive observation has been when students rate their own performance by watching a videotape followed by an interview with the teacher to observe and discuss their performance, the students have experienced improved presentational skills. The results of this assessment uphold such a conclusion. Also, it has been felt that by observing and rating a sample presentations using the course evaluation form the students presentational development is enhanced. Once again, this conclusion appears to be supported by the assessment data gathered in this study.

The second hypothesis that no significant difference would exist between female and male student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking was not upheld by the data. The results reflected no significant gain reported by the male students (although it was near significance). On the other hand, the female subjects reported a statistically significant improvement in their presentational skills. Some indications have suggested that males are generally more developed in terms of public address skills. If this is accurate, it would seem reasonable for the females, who traditionally have been given less attention and fewer opportunities to develop presentational skills, would report a greater degree of skills development than their male counterparts.

As it concerns hypothesis 3 that no significant difference would exist between undergraduate and graduate student ratings of their communication skills development following participation in a 16-week college course on business and professional speaking, it was not upheld by the data. As reported in Table 3 and shown in Figures 4 and 5, the undergraduate participants reported statistically significant improvement in their communication skills development, however, no such report was made by the graduate students. Two factors may have influenced these results, in that: (a) the graduate students have more professional experience and (b) they have more educational experience.

Finally, concerning the broader issue of assessment as discussed above, assessment is important for two major reasons: (a) to insure student success in college and (b) to support faculty requests concerning promotion, tenure, and merit decisions. Assessment has been receiving a lot of attention in the 1990s. The issue has been raised on a regular basis by students, the faculty, school administrators, governing boards, legislators, and the public at large. This field research provides factual data these parties can use in assessing teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. In fact, many, if not all, of the criteria of effective assessment previously discussed can be met when such an assessment technique is employed in the classroom. Concerned parties should be encouraged to employ this or similar strategies.

Limitations and Further Research

Certainly the data is useful, however, the sample was limited in size (pre-test N=20; post-test N=19). This resulted in small cells for comparisons. The study should be replicated several times in order to enhance the quality of the data.

Also, the assessment tool involved a "self-report". Such data is less

reliable than observational and experimental data. It would be beneficial to conduct the study in a more controlled environment in order to show more conclusively the effects of the course on communication skills development for business and professional speaking.

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APPENDIX A

"Skills Assessment Form"

DIRECTIONS: For each of the skills identified in the list below, circle the number which best describes your current level of skill development.

	LOW DEVELOPMENT						HIGH DEVELOPMENT
Understanding meanings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Analyze while listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Give feedback	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ask questions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Choose a specific speech topic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Choose a specific speech purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop main points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Organize the main points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Analyze the audience	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Research a speech topic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support main points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop logical arguments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop emotional appeals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop your credibility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop an introduction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop a conclusion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Develop an outline	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Use visual aids	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Choose words	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Handle communication apprehension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Be assertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Articulate and pronounce words correctly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Practice a speech	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Remember a speech	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Deliver a speech	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Think on your feet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Plan for audience response	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Adapt to feedback from listeners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Adapt to the speaking situation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Handle questions from the audience	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Handle criticism	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Determine if you accomplished your goal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Identify areas for further development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Change audience's attitudes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Change audience's actions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Talk on short notice	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Handle special occasion speaking situations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

NOTE: This form will be kept on file until the end of the semester at which time you will be asked to reassess your public speaking skills.